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**WHY DID THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD FAIL?  
THE DOUBLE-FACED DISCOURSE OF IKHWAN AND POLITICAL  
RESPONSE TO ISLAMIST-SECULAR DIVERSITY IN EGYPT<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** For the first time since its establishment in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood reached political power when one of its members held the presidency in Egypt after the presidential elections of 2012. One year after being in power, another revolution unwounded against the Muslim brotherhood's president, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood, by the end of 1990s and the beginning of 2000s has launched two internet websites: Arabic and English and used to adopt double faced discourse to attract supporters from different political attitudes, namely Islamists and secularists. This paper argues that one of the important reasons behind the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood In Egypt is that it failed after it came to power to transform its double faced discourse into policies. Decisions and policies of the Muslim Brotherhood were contradictive and did not satisfy any side, after a short while, the group lost all its allies.

**Keywords:** *Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, ikhwan, islam, secular*

**The Muslim Brotherhood: A Historical Overview**

In 1928, Hassan el-Banna, a school teacher in a small town in Egypt (*Isma'elya*), established a small group with six of his friends, which aimed at improving the life of the poor in the neighbourhood. They started out by

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<sup>1</sup> The study is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood Official websites in Arabic and in English versions from 2009 till 2010. It is worth mentioning that after the revolution of 25th of January 2011, the group could have its own newspaper and its own television channel which became the source of the discourse and the views of the group.

*Danubius*, XXXII, Supliment, Galați, 2014, pp. 75-86.

establishing an evening school for teaching those who could not attend school regularly, belonging mainly to the working class. Shortly afterwards, the group established a mosque and focused on teaching the Islam to the young people. Within three years, the group grew rapidly and el-Banna was able to establish a branch in Cairo; the headquarters was subsequently moved to Cairo. In 1932, there were about 300 branches of the group – which got the name of the Muslim Brotherhood – and they were spread all over Egypt. At that stage, the group paid attention mostly to Islamic education, Islamic teaching, and returning the Islamic values to the Egyptian society, which, for el-Banna, was influenced by Western imperialist values.

During the 1940s, millions of young educated people joined the group, which extended its social services for the poor, especially when it built hospitals, pharmacies, and schools. In addition, it had numerous newspapers and magazines, which were used to express the group's opinions about various issues. The group then established a military wing – the Secret Apparatus – whose main role was to fight the British colonization.

During 1950s and 1960s, the Muslim Brothers were accused of trying to assassinate Nasser, therefore many were jailed and tortured, while others were sentenced to the death penalty. The group itself was banned. Nasser's successor, Sadat, who lacked the charismatic character of his predecessor, thought of religion as a source of legitimacy, so he followed a different policy with the Muslim Brotherhood. The concentration camps were closed and the imprisoned members were released. The main objective of the group at that time was to work legally, in other words to turn into a political party, as Sadat permitted a multi-party system. But the battle between Sadat and the group prevented it from becoming a party. Because of its position regarding the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1979, the relationship between the group and the government shattered again.

The relationship remained the same during the 1980s. The group remained illegal, but the government was tolerant regarding some of its activities, such as offering social services and publishing newspapers and magazines. The confrontations started again in the 1990s when the group gained massive public support from the Egyptian society because of the extensive social services it provided. At that time, the state reduced its offering of such services according to the agreements signed with the International Monetary Fund. The group could dominate university elections as well as councils and syndicates.

During 1990s, the group had two official websites: one in Arabic and another one in English. These websites were its only media channels, as the group could not have its own newspaper or television channel. By using these websites, the group could pass on its discourse to different new groups, especially through the English website, whose followers was comprised of Egyptian high class

members, western intellectuals and politicians, who were thus being transmitted the group's views related to many issues such as: Islamic Laws (Sharia), debatable concepts (Democracy, human rights and elections), relations with the West, the Palestinian issue, and the position of women and minorities. After the revolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, the group got the majority in the legislative elections of 2011. In June 2012, Mohamed Mursi, one of the group's members, became the president after winning the presidential elections of 2012. In the next section, the discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood regarding the political issues mentioned above will be presented on the official websites of the Muslim Brotherhood websites in both Arabic and English versions.

### **Islamic Laws (Sharia)**

“Allah is our objective;  
The Prophet is our model;  
Qur'an is our constitution;  
Jihad is our way;  
Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope”

*(The slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood).*

The above slogan shows that the Quran is not only the main source of law in the view of the Muslim Brotherhood, but that it is also the constitution itself. The idea of the Quran as a constitution appeared extensively in the Arabic version of the Muslim Brotherhood website, especially during the crisis brought by the burning of the Quran in the United States of America in September 2010. The Muslim Brotherhood published a message issued by the Supreme Guide<sup>2</sup> on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2010, which expressed the group's dissatisfaction with any insult brought to the Quran (although burning the Quran was not specifically pointed out) and called on Muslims to defend the Quran in three ways. The first one is to read it. The second one is to consider it as the main source of religious rules, and the third one is to consider it as the main source of law and rules of life and to apply these laws in all aspects of life. The message pointed out that the Muslim Brotherhood should be the model for Muslims in understanding the Quran and working according to its rules so that the Quran could become “our constitution and the constitution of the *Ummah*”.

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<sup>2</sup> “Weekly Message of the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood”, accessed September 23, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=71077&SecID=213>.

The Supreme Guide stated that the constitution of a state whose religion is Islam should be based on the Quran, which should be its main source of law. He stressed that any article in the constitution that contradicts Islam should be omitted and removed.

The main focus of the English version concerning this issue is that Sharia law has different meanings<sup>3</sup>; there are confirmations that some people consider Sharia as a rigid political ideology, but not all Muslims have the same understanding. Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of Hassan el-Banna, has a different understanding. For Ramadan, Sharia is an applied ethics: "I'm trying to come up with a new framework for Islamic applied ethics...meaning what? That we have a common ground, a common area, where the Christian ethics, the Jewish ethics, the Muslim ethics, the humanist ethics...could provide reform for the better."<sup>4</sup>

Islamic law is not only about the set of punishments mentioned in the Quran (*Hodood*), but also about many man-made laws developed in the cultures where Islam has spread. "Islamic law is all about wisdom and achieving people's welfare in this life, it is all about justice, mercy, wisdom and good". What conflicts with human rights, justice, and wisdom is against Islamic law. The website tries to send a message that a very important part of the Islamic law is the Islamic normative law, which is the product of the understanding of many scholars who studied the Quran and the Sunna.

As stated on the English website, Islamic law is flexible, and its understanding of 1400 years ago is not and cannot be the same as the understanding nowadays. Now there are, for example, Muslim minorities in many Western countries. These countries have different law systems, and cannot be asked to adapt these systems for the sake of the minorities. Even in Islamic countries, the rapid changes call for new readings and interpretations. Religious people should make more efforts for new "*ijtihadat*" or interpretations of the Islamic Sharia in order to adapt it to different places and times.

### **Women and Religious Minorities**

Regarding the Jewish communities, according to the Arabic website, the normal image is that they are traitors to their nation countries while being loyal to Israel.<sup>5</sup> This was the case not only for Egypt but for all countries where Jewish minorities lived. They preferred to live in ghettos, isolating themselves from the

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Robert D. Crane, "Shari'ah Compliance in America," accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26581&ref=search.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Amr Mahmoud, "Egypt's Jews: wealth, treachery and sabotage," accessed September 2, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=12721&SecID=0>.

social affairs. As for the economic aspect, they always had their own Jewish projects and refused to join any national ones; they also did not allow other non-Jews to be partners of their projects. Before 1952, the Jewish minority owned 20% of all Egyptian companies, while all Egyptians owned 25% of these companies. And a Jew (Youssef *Katawy*) was the Minister of Finance, the minister of transportation and a member in the upper house of the Egyptian parliament for many years.

They actively participated in the arts – cinema production, direction, and music composition –, however, they did not add any real value to the Egyptian culture. In addition, they tried to destroy the native culture by importing different values and behaviors into the society with their movies. Only the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Misr Alfatah* party paid attention to these efforts of the Jews to destroy the culture of the society and had a clear view regarding this danger. After the establishment of Israel, the Jews in Egypt announced that they were against Zionism, but secretly collaborated with the Jewish gangs in Palestine<sup>6</sup>.

The English one offers quite a different view. On the English website, there is a distinction between Jews and Zionists and between Judaism as a religion and Zionism as an aggressive ideology. For example, it is pointed out that Sheikh *Yusuf Alqaradawy*<sup>7</sup> stresses that, firstly Muslims should differentiate between Zionists and Jews; secondly, Muslims have a problem with Zionists, who have an aggressive ideology, but at the same time can and should co-exist with Jews. Additionally, both groups, Muslims and Jews, have a common ground as followers of two Abrahamic religions. *Alqaradawy* pointed out that Jews who believe in the authentic Torah are close to Muslims. Moreover, the followers of the two religions have common rituals and religious practices. For example, neither eat pork, have halal/kosher food, and prohibit statues in their places of worship. Not only do they have common ground in terms of religion, but also historically they suffered the same brutal treatment in the period following the fall of Andalusia and the fall of the Islamic rule there. *Alqaradawy* stressed the fact that Muslims are against the oppressive Zionism, not against the Jews. In the same way the website focused on the news of the European Jewish convoy which carried medical and food assistances to Gaza.

The third issue is that the group clarified that Christians can hold any political position such as prime minister or minister or representative in Parliament. At the same time, the group ignored its position regarding the presidency for

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Yusuf Alqaradawy, "Muslims are anti Zionists not anti Jews," accessed September 6, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=16936&ref=search.php>.

Christians, since this contradicts with the Sharia.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the group interviewed the Coptic writer and thinker Rafik Habeeb<sup>9</sup> who assured them that the Islamic Law or Sharia is a guarantee for non-Muslims in Islamic countries. According to Habeeb, this opinion is justified by the fact that the main point of Sharia is that it is applied to non-Muslims only in matters which do not contradict with their own beliefs, and therefore Habeeb does not mind having laws made on the basis of the Sharia. On the English website, there is no clear opinion or position on Christians standing as candidates for presidential elections, but it is stressed that Christians can hold any political position such as prime minister or minister. In addition, there is a confirmation of the positive historical role played by the Egyptian church in different crises.

The group confirmed the role of women in politics; women can and should participate in public affairs and stand as candidates for parliaments, municipal elections, and all public councils. They should vote and express their opinion on all candidates. As far as the presidency is concerned, on the Arabic website the group still refuses the idea that women can hold the presidential position<sup>10</sup>. On the English website, it published an article by Abd Almonem Abo Alftooh,<sup>11</sup> one of the famous reformists in the group, who clarified that there are no religious constraints on women or religious minorities in Islamic countries with regard to the political positions, including presidency, and that there are different religious opinions on this matter, depending on certain social conditions. It is worth mentioning that the article was not allowed to be published on the Arabic website, as it does not suit the editing policy

### **Debatable Concepts: Human rights, Elections and Democracy**

“Human rights” as a term is usually used by the group on the English website when talking about issues related to the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the security forces, such as the trials of civilians before military

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<sup>8</sup> “Muslim Brotherhood program for legislative elections of 2010,” accessed December 23, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.net/Bernameg.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> “The Islamic law is a guarantee for the Copts, interview with Rafik Habeeb,” accessed September 30, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=19705&SecID=373>. Rafik Habeeb is a thinker, specialising in Islamic movements, and said to be very close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>10</sup> “Interview with Mohamed Habeeb,” accessed September 24, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=25785&SecID=0>

<sup>11</sup> “Muslim Brotherhood Reform,” accessed September 29, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=19355&ref=search.php>

courts<sup>12</sup> and aggressive actions taken by the police against protesters. What is observed is that the group refers to the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations and the comments and reports of human rights centers and associations to support its opposition to the trials of civilians – usually belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups – before military courts or to condemn the arrest and torture of protesters and strikers.

The same term is used on the Arabic website for the same issues; however, the references are different.<sup>13</sup> The group usually refers to religious references such as the Quran and the sayings of the prophets in addition to the opinions of important religious persons in Egypt and in the Islamic world.

The situation of the group was not surprising. The fear of political marginalization after its boycott of the election in 1990 rendered the group keen on participating in the election and on refusing to participate in the boycott. To face the criticism of the opposition, especially that of the National Association for Change, which is an ally of the group, the Muslim Brotherhood resorted to a political Fatwa to justify its position. On the Arabic website, the group published a Fatwa by the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Badeea, which stated that the participation in the elections was considered one of the forms of a great Jihad<sup>14</sup> for the group, and boycotting these elections was considered a kind of escaping from the war. Additionally, in order to face the expected election fraud, the group published a Fatwa by Nasr Fared Wasel<sup>15</sup>, who stated<sup>16</sup> that election fraud is considered one of the forbidden great sins, as a real Muslim does not lie or cheat, and should thus be refused by the Egyptians.

### **Relations with the United States**

According to the group, the United States is responsible for the anarchy in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and it believes this anarchy is proof of the intention of the United States to destroy the Islamic countries and to loot their wealth and resources. Besides, the United States should stop its intervention in the

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<sup>12</sup> “The Situation of Human Rights in Egypt 2009: Introduction, summary and recommendations, EOHR.ORG,” accessed September 23, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=25734&ref=search.php>.

<sup>13</sup> “Juries of the Ummah: it is forbidden to torture a Muslim,” accessed September 7, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=71245&SecID=0>.

<sup>14</sup> Muslim clerics differentiate between two kinds of Jihad: the great one, which refers to facing corruption in all its forms and in all aspects: political, social, economic, etc. and the small Jihad, which refers to going for war to defend one’s life, land, property, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Egyptian cleric and former Mufti of Egypt.

<sup>16</sup> “Fraud elections is one of the great sins, interview with Nasr Fared Wasel,” accessed September 21, 2010, <http://ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=71422&SecID=0>.

Palestinian issue in order to allow a real solution to be reached. In other Islamic countries, the West supports authoritarian governments and never raises the issue and the argument of human rights unless there is an interest for the Western countries.<sup>17</sup>

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, there are occupation forces, while in the other Islamic countries, the political systems work as agents for the West and help achieving Western interests. This policy started with the colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the direct military colonialism ended because it became difficult to continue, it was replaced by corrupt political systems and intervention in the internal affairs of the states. On its Arabic website, the group sheds a light on the return of military colonialism under the cover of the fight against terrorism, and the increasing numbers of civilians killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan by the American troops show the level of hatred of the Western countries against Muslims. In the same context, the website stresses the strong connections between Zionism and the United States, as the latter supports Zionism in the media and in military terms.<sup>18</sup>

The criticism of Western countries and especially the United States became clear during the burning of the Quran. The Arabic website published a statement by the staff of Alazhar University, which described the act as a new crusade war on Islam and an expression of enmity and racism against Muslims and Islam.

As mentioned above, the English website tends to differentiate between the people and the governments in Western countries. In the event of the burning of the Quran, the Muslim Brotherhood accused the American government, which uses and supports media messages against Muslims, and accused President Obama, who could not stop this event according to any constitutional basis, but who could at least have shown his rejection of such acts. The website publishes stories of young Americans who spent time in Islamic and specifically Arabic countries and who discovered new positive aspects of these societies and people and changed their views about Islam and Muslims. Things such as interactions with young Muslims listening to music and understanding how women are involved in public life lead to mutual understanding rather than *Islamophobia*.<sup>19</sup>

Another important focus on the English website is that the group tries to make it clear that there is a difference between various “types” of Islamic movements, especially between two types: the Jihadi movements and the moderate movements. The former obviously adopts violence as a main tool for achieving its goals; meanwhile the latter adopts other tools, such as peaceful struggle through

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<sup>17</sup> “The Emergency, Iraq and Palestine, Ikhwanonline statements,” accessed October 5, 2010, <http://ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=64025&SecID=0>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Cornwall, “My Muslim brothers and sisters,” accessed November 28, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26350&ref=search.php>.



the media, through elections, or peaceful strikes and demonstrations. Here, the group focuses on the difference between Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood regarding their ideologies, histories, and tools. Additionally, it shows that it rejects the ideological basis of Al-Qaeda and that the latter criticises the Muslim Brotherhood for its moderate ideology.<sup>20</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood refers to many situations in different Islamic countries in which Islamic movements (some of them affiliations of the Muslim Brotherhood) announced their rejection of Al-Qaeda's behaviour. An example is the message of *Ayman Al-Zawahiri* to *Aljamaa Alislamiya* (Islamic Group) in which he criticised the Islamic Group because it decided to abandon violence, revise its ideology, and adopt peaceful methods. The Islamists of Libya published a jurisprudential revision titled "Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability, and the Judgment of the People" in which they announced the wrongness of adopting violence and decided to abandon it.

### **Palestinian Issue**

On the Arabic website concerning the view of the Muslim Brotherhood on the Palestinian Issue we find: (1) Supporting Hamas as a resistance movement and its bombing operations against the Israelis; (2) Condemning the behavior of the Palestinian authority and the Arabic governments on the Arabic website, while ignoring to mention anything about these operations on the English website; (3) Calling on all Muslim governments and individuals to take part in the Jihad in Palestine to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque as an expression of the *Ummah* concept, especially on the Arabic website. On the English website, there is the same call with a focus on inviting Muslims in the West to lobby in order to be able to put pressure on Western governments. The group is keen to show its historical role in the issue; (4) It was discovered that Israel as a name is almost not mentioned on the Arabic website; instead, the term "Zionist entity" is used to refer to Israel, as an indication of the non-recognition of Israel. On the English website, the word Israel is used normally; (5) Accusing the West, especially the USA, of being the main factor behind the problem by supporting Israel is mentioned on both websites; however, on the English website, there is an invitation for intellectuals to support the historical and legal rights of the Palestinians.

On the Arabic website, the group stresses the fact that Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood affiliation in Palestine; therefore the group supports it entirely. Hamas

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<sup>20</sup>Camille Tawil, "Al-Qaeda losing supporters in jihadi groups across Arab world," accessed September 9, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=25755&ref=search.php>.

and the resistance movements in the region are the only hope for liberating Palestine. According to the website, the resistance of Hamas and the Palestinians who support it is the soul of the Quran, which gives them the power to refuse to recognize Israel and to fight until they liberate all of Palestine. What clearly proves their confidence in God is their reaction towards the burning of hard copies of the Quran: As a response to that invitation, Hamas decided to teach the Quran to sixty thousand people.<sup>21</sup>

On the Arabic website, the Jihad, which is the strategy of resistance, is the only way to get the occupied lands back, as negotiations and talks have not led to any results except to the destruction of more homes and the occupation of more lands. In this context, the Jihad is an obligatory religious duty (*Farida*) for all Muslims, not only governments or Muslims in Palestine – the whole Islamic *Ummah* should participate. On the other hand, Jihad does not only refer to the military form, but should be a war waged in many areas: economic, media, political, etc. Muslims should work to develop their economic systems, their political systems, and their media systems in order to be able to win the war.<sup>22</sup> Israel is mentioned by name and the settlements are even mentioned with their Israeli names. Concerning the recognition of Israel, the website published the statements by Farouk Albaz,<sup>23</sup> who stated that Hamas is willing to recognize Israel if they reach an agreement or at least sit together at the negotiation table.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Khaled Mashaal announced at a conference in 2008 that Hamas was willing to accept any agreement with Israel, which means recognition of Israel as a legal country, if the Palestinians accept this agreement in a public referendum.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

Trying to satisfy different political-religious attitudes in the Egyptian society, the Muslim Brotherhood, as an opposition movement, has presented itself in two different ways: on the Arabic official website it appears as a religious traditional movement, uses traditional terms and refers to traditional interpretations of the texts. On its English website, the group has presented itself as a moderate

<sup>21</sup> “A new heroic operation by Qassam,” accessed September 2, 2010, <http://ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=70139&SecID=0>.

<sup>22</sup> “Jihad is the only way to liberate AlAqsa, weekly message by the Supreme Guide,” accessed September 27, 2010, <http://ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=55797&SecID=0>.

<sup>23</sup> Egyptian politician.

<sup>24</sup> “Egypt: Hamas is ready to recognize Israel,” accessed October 15, 2012, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=2551>.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Siegman, “US Hamas policy blocks Middle East peace,” accessed October 11, 2010, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=26293&ref=search.php>.

political movement who uses new interpretations and a flexible language. Holding the position of the presidency and being involved in writing the constitution, the Muslim Brotherhood had to choose one position: a religious movement which seeks to mix religion and politics or a political movement which gives priority to civil laws and minimizes the role of religion in the political life. Failing to choose a specific position made the group lose its alliances either with the Islamists or with the secularists and led to the isolation of the Muslim Brotherhood. And in one of the very rare situations, Salafis and secularists got unified against the Muslim Brotherhood president.

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